

Maine Voices: Work permits for asylum applicants? Slow down

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By Jonette Christian

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HOLDEN — As more asylum seekers arrive in Portland, members of Maine’s congressional delegation want to accelerate work permits, pointing to labor shortages and taxpayer costs. But on a closer look, good reasons exist for continuing to require applicants to wait for work permits.

Before 1994, we gave asylum seekers work permits on arrival, which led to an explosion of asylum applications and overwhelmed our courts. The Clinton administration established a six-month waiting period to discourage frivolous claims and address a growing backlog. Following the implementation of the waiting period, asylum claims plummeted 57 percent, freeing up resources to focus on bonafide refugees.

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Denise N. Slavin, then-vice president of the National Association of Immigration Lawyers, told The New York Times in 2011, “Fraud in immigration asylum is a huge issue and a major problem.” In 2012, the Obama administration indicted 10 New York law firms and dozens of immigration lawyers and others who helped asylum applicants fake their stories.

Since 2009 asylum claims have skyrocketed, swamping our courts again. In response, the Trump administration, taking a cue from Clinton, proposed a longer waiting period for work authorization. A more effective response would be to increase the number of immigration judges to process applications more rapidly, focusing on serious claims and expeditiously deporting those with frivolous claims.

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I believe that the labor benefit of employing asylum applicants is exaggerated, as court denial rates for West African applicants range from 40 percent to 50 percent, which suggests that almost half of Portland’s asylum seekers will eventually be denied and become potentially deportable. And of those who achieve refugee status, there are substantial costs.

An internal study rejected by the Trump administration and leaked to The New York Times, “The Fiscal Costs of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program at the Federal, State, and Local Levels from 2005-2014,” provides important data for Maine’s representatives in Washington.

The authors estimate that refugees and their dependents generated a \$52.8 billion federal surplus but caused a net deficit at the state and local levels of \$35.9 billion. Since the federal surplus would be shared nationwide, but the state and local deficits fall entirely on state and local governments, increasing the number of refugees in Maine would cost Maine taxpayers.

And the federal benefit? I imagine that the study's computed federal benefit is inflated, as the impact of refugees on the high cost of national defense or federal debt was not included in this study – a surprising omission.

Refugee costs shouldn't surprise us. Moving to a new country, learning the language and making enough money to support your family is difficult. The Maine Department of Labor looked at the employment data five years after Somali immigrants arrived in Lewiston-Auburn in 2001. By 2006, only half of working-age Somalis had worked at all. Many of those jobs were seasonal and low wage.

Before providing work permits to a new population of asylees, we need more data. How long does it take most refugees to make enough in wages to support their families without taxpayer programs? Will Portland's applicants remain when they get refugee status? Or will they move to cities with better wages and larger populations of their compatriots? Do they have the skills our employers need?

The New Mainers Resource Center, providing language instruction, case management and links to employers for Maine's nearly 20,000 immigrants and refugees, reports that 398 people contacted the center for services in 2018; 73 percent had a college degree, and 95 percent of this population found jobs. But we don't know how this number compares to the total refugee population. How many asylum applicants who already have work permits are employed? And at what wages? The center also reports that one of the greatest challenges is finding employment that pays a livable wage.

When politicians provide foreign workers to employers that don't pay a livable wage, then taxpayers will eventually subsidize the employee with public programs. It would be better to require employers to recruit Americans.

And we might ponder the future. A recent McKinsey study is projecting that automation will replace nearly half of the American workforce by 2055. Walmart already uses robots to stock shelves, and McKinsey predicts that automation will sweep the economy. Let's slow down, and think this one through.

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